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DE GAULLE AND FRANCE'S NATIONAL INTERESTS:
LA GLOIRE ET LA GRANDEUR

CORE COURSE I ESSAY

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I. FRANCE BEFORE 1958

France emerged victorious with the allied powers after World War II but the experience of the war had badly eroded her national sense of integrity and honor. In 1940, the relative ease with which German forces routed French defenses and occupied much of France's continental territory was a severe blow to Gallic pride. The shock of this reality permeated the national consciousness for at least a decade after Germany's surrender in 1945, and a series of ineffective coalition governments were frequently unable to achieve the minimum consensus required to obtain parliamentary approval on any kind of an agenda. The result was domestic paralysis, which greatly diminished France's self-esteem and reduced her international influence. Moreover, pre-occupation with the requirements of economic reconstruction diverted the country's energies away from the processes of political rebirth during the country's postwar period.

Furthermore, France wallowed in the nostalgia of her waning empire. By the 1950s the inexorable move towards independence around the world was lessening the degree of control France exercised on Algeria and on her colonies in Africa and the Levant, on her holdings in Asia, and on territories in the South Pacific and the Caribbean. This declining control further diminished her reputation and influence among her allies. Internationally, France in the 1950s was the equivalent of General Motors on the U.S. domestic industrial scene today: a reduced power among her peers. France no longer had the power to influence Europe and the world as she once had.

By 1958 several Fourth-Republic governments had been formed and had fallen.

General Charles de Gaulle, who had led the forces of the Free French during the war, only to be rebuffed in his attempts to head the first postwar government, brooded in forced retirement for 12 years at his home in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises. His patience was rewarded, for by 1958 the repeated failures of the Fourth Republic allowed him to dictate his requirements to lead a new government. He insisted on a new constitution which gave the head of state quite broad powers vis-a-vis the legislative branch. Once the National Assembly met these demands and agreed upon the changes he was insisting on in the new constitution, General de Gaulle agreed to form a government under the new Fifth Republic.

This paper briefly examines de Gaulle's practice of statecraft in restoring some of France's influence in world politics and national prestige to his compatriots. It also speculates on what his longer-term impact on France was by asking the question: "where would France be today without de Gaulle?"

II. FRANCE UNDER DE GAULLE

De Gaulle's assumption of France's leadership was welcomed with mixed emotions by western leaders, most of whom knew him well from the alliance of World War II. The experience of these relationships (notably hostile with Churchill and Roosevelt), along with his nineteenth-century classical military education, had imbued de Gaulle with a number of rigid principles which dominated his view of world realities. First, he came to power convinced that France could achieve her "appropriate" international role only by first promoting her own national interests. (This was his

principle of independence, which overrode all other political considerations, and which, he believed, was a sine-qua-non for assuring France's deserved role as the pre-eminent European leader in international affairs.) He judged that France's national interests were threatened both from the East (communism) and from the West (Anglo-Saxon "hegemony"), and only by reinforcing Europe's influence within the traditionally accepted bipolar balance-of-power context could France's role be maintained. Second, but no less important, he believed that, in order for France to regain its lofty position of influence among world powers, French citizens had to re-acquire their unique sense of the glory and the greatness (la gloire et la grandeur) of the nation's culture and identity. These two themes, therefore, dominated his policy objectives: greatness (i.e., national strength) and independence.

How did de Gaulle go about achieving these objectives? In other words, what key event enabled him to practice statecraft to advance French national interests? Among the allies, de Gaulle stimulated a debate on western security arrangements by calling into question the fundamental rationale of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, especially as it applied to French security. The lessons of history and logic, de Gaulle reasoned, argued that France could not rely solely on such a collective-security arrangement. He believed that France could not rely absolutely on America's guarantees should European interests be threatened separately. In his view, the U.S. lined up with the U.K. to create an Anglo-Saxon "hegemony" to force Europe's hand vis-a-vis the Soviets. France had no assurance that the interests of this "hegemony" would always be identical to those of Europe, and, therefore, of

France. According to this logic, Europe--and France--could easily become expendable, and only a continental (West) European alliance (with France at its head) could guarantee France's integrity against the Soviet threat, the "hegemony" of the Anglo-Saxons, and an antagonistic Germany in the future. He acted on this reasoning by pulling France out of the NATO command structure, by unilaterally developing nuclear-deterrence capability, and by taking international positions aimed at emphasizing France's independence, such as recognition of mainland China and opposition to the build-up of U.S. influence in southeast Asia (one of France's former colonial areas) and to the Vietnam war.

These series of actions greatly perplexed de Gaulle's western allies. The U.S. in particular was angered, interpreting de Gaulle's policies and actions as contributing to a weakening of the anti-Soviet coalition. The U.K., which France rebuffed from entering the Common Market, felt especially injured, and Germany, though treated with a bilateral accord in the first of several steps de Gaulle took to enhance his vision of a European power center to counterbalance the U.S. and Soviet bipolar condominium, (and to exert control over Germany's balance of power within Europe) often found itself unsure of what de Gaulle's ultimate objectives were.

De Gaulle's incessant repetition of these themes, manifested in a variety of sometimes confusing public-policy shifts, proved exasperating and sometimes almost inimical to Washington and London. In the U.S. view, Soviet power under the guise of communist ideology represented the dominant world threat to the western alliance, surely overriding narrower European interests.

III. IMPACT OF DE GAULLE'S POLICIES

However, with the benefit of retrospect, I find that de Gaulle's vision and actions are understandable and can be justified when analyzed in light of France's own national interests. Despite our annoyance with and criticism of de Gaulle's international positions on matters affecting the West's security, NATO's protective role remained essentially intact and our own security interests were not ultimately hampered. France felt its international position strengthened: independence became, and remains, a goal of its own.¹

Furthermore, while not underestimating the threat of Soviet power to world peace and security, along with the Anglo-Saxon hegemonic threat, de Gaulle identified Germany as the most proximate (potential) threat to France's security. Driving his policy-making, then, was the fundamental need to assure that first of all Germany never again be in a position to threaten France's security, independence and welfare. To this end de Gaulle negotiated a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Germany, signed in 1963, which he saw as the "instrument of a purely European political cooperation grouping and construction under French hegemony and leadership".² During the Soviet attempt to force the West's collective hand on Berlin in 1961, de Gaulle was the strongest force of resistance among the western allies to any

¹When France reportedly did not allow overflight of U.S. bombers during the U.S. raid on Libya in 1986, the Prime Minister's defense was that "France is known for its independent foreign policy." It was unnecessary for him to address the substance of the issue, but simply, for domestic public consumption, to justify denial of overflight rights from bases in the U.K. on the principle of "independence".¹

²Don Cook, *Charles de Gaulle, A Biography*, Brandt & Brandt, 1983, p. 364

modification of the status of West Berlin. Ironically, de Gaulle's unwavering stance probably was more effective in maintaining a consistently hard-line position vis-a-vis the Soviets (the greatest threat to U.S. national security interests) than the probing by the U.S. and the U.K. to find a possible accommodation with the U.S.S.R. on Berlin.³

Typifying his view of the world and France's role, he assessed the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, which the U.S. identified as the greatest threat to world security since World War II, as a bipolar confrontation outside the sphere of Europe's (and, hence, France's) interest.

IV. FRANCE WITHOUT DE GAULLE

Having concluded that de Gaulle was a most effective practitioner of statecraft as definer of a national security strategy in defense of France's national interests, I would like to approach this issue from another direction: what would France's influence on world affairs have become without de Gaulle's re-entry on the national scene in 1958, and his dominance of French politics until 1969? My thesis is that de Gaulle's single-minded pursuit of France's greatness and independence was instrumental in reversing France's decline and restoring his country to a role of importance in world affairs beyond her own assets, thereby fully protecting national interests and reinforcing her position of strength and security.

Without his vision, it is difficult to see how French politics could have risen above the divisive, ungovernable morass into which the Fourth Republic had sunk. No

³*Ibid*, p. 351

other leader matched his leadership stature nor did any other political figure have the strength and influence to shape the new constitution in favor of a strong executive the way de Gaulle did. France would have remained a powerful European country, but less powerful than de Gaulle pushed her to be and with a number of strategic decisions made at supranational levels (NATO and the European Commission). With her abundant and unique cultural and productive capacities she would have remained an important trader on the world market of goods and ideas ("a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou" has appeal far beyond her borders); these assets would likely have helped France retain the distinction of receiving more tourists annually than any other country on the planet; Paris would have remained the vibrant center of a country renowned for scholarship and science, theater and the arts. But her role in international politics would have been less prominent, overshadowed by the western collective-security measures. De Gaulle's genius was his skill in enabling France to benefit simultaneously from these multilateral arrangements while distancing his country from any of the compromises to French national interests, and avoiding the untidy encumbrances which such involvement would bring. Nearly 25 years after his departure from French national life, de Gaulle remains an influential force in French politics.⁴

V. COULD THE DE GAULLE MODEL HELP THE U.S.?

⁴The party he founded remains a significant influence in French politics, and is familiarly known as the Gaullist Party (PRP: Parti pour le Rassemblement du Peuple).

I cannot conclude that de Gaulle's success can be applied to the practice of American statecraft. Comparing his execution of statecraft to ours is so risky as to be meaningless. He conducted his statecraft from a basis of national insufficiency and reduced power, but he was able skillfully to expand France's share of influence on world affairs and international policy despite some powerful odds. The U.S., on the other hand, remains the pre-eminent force in world politics, despite significant structural economic problems today. If the U.S. relative share in influence, as measured by its proportionate hold on assets, continues to diminish; the "de Gaulle model" would be impossible to apply because of the inherent inability in our system to apply the strong presidential model of executive-branch leadership vis-a-vis the other branches of government.

VI. CONCLUSION

The drastic reduction of the Soviet and communist threat to our own and world security derives largely from the severe economic distortions within the USSR generated by the extraordinary and eventually unsustainable levels of public expenditures (spurred in part by high defense expenditures in response to western security measures). For the French, the reality of this "implosion" of the Soviet empire in the absence of direct application by the West of its military power justifies, in retrospect, de Gaulle's posture of distance from NATO and the U.S., and enhances his image as guarantor of France's independence and guardian of its prestige.

De Gaulle resigned his office abruptly in 1969 after voters turned down his

position in a national referendum. He died the following year. He had succeeded in promoting France's national interests even while steering France through a most difficult period of tumultuous changes: post-war reconstruction, implementation of a new constitution, and decolonization. His actions left his successors with an impressive strategic framework which has continued to function intact through three presidents and four governments. To call de Gaulle the savior of France in the second half of the twentieth century is not considered an exaggeration by his followers. France's greatness and glory still shine, brightest in the eyes of its citizens if not before the world.